

Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 1

11-1-2017

The Vikings in the North Atlantic: The Rise and Fall of the Greenland Colony

Caitlyn Floyd Geiger

Armstrong State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Geiger, Caitlyn Floyd (2017) "The Vikings in the North Atlantic: The Rise and Fall of the Greenland Colony," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2017.070101

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol7/iss1/1>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

The Vikings in the North Atlantic:
The Rise and Fall of the Greenland Colony

Caitlyn Floyd Geiger
Armstrong State University

Even as a young man, Eirik the Red was involved in “slayings” with his father.¹ According to *The Vinland Sagas*, they were outlawed and fled from Norway to start anew in Iceland. Eirik made a new home in Iceland, but he found himself involved in violence with neighbors whose deaths made him an outlaw once again.² Narrowly escaping punishment with the help of friends he sailed west from Iceland with the intent of finding uncharted land which had been glimpsed by fellow Norseman, Gunnbjorn, when off course at sea.³ He entered this place “under the glacier called Hvitserk,” or Gunnbjorn Fjeld, in what is now known as the Watkins Range.⁴ From this bleak starting point Eirik sailed around Greenland’s most southern coast where he landed and positioned his holdfast, Brattahlid, around 982 in what would become the Eastern Viking Settlement.⁵ He gave the land mass as a whole the name Greenland with hopes that it would attract others from Iceland to follow and settle in his wake.⁶ Around 986 he facilitated the fruition of that hope by leading two dozen ships from Iceland to Greenland.⁷ Only fourteen of those ships made it to Greenland, but many followed in the years after.⁸ This was the

¹ *The Vinland Sagas*, translated by Keneva Kunz and Gisli Sigurdsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 26.

² *Ibid*, 26-27.

³ *Ibid*, 27.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ Ib Persson, “The Fate of the Icelandic Vikings in Greenland,” *Man* 4 (1969): 620.

⁶ *The Vinland Sagas*, 28.

⁷ Chris Mooney, “Vikings’ mysterious abandonment of Greenland was not due to climate change, study suggests,” *The Washington Post* (2015).

⁸ Dale Mackenzie Brown, “The Fate of Greenland’s Vikings,” *Archaeology Archive* (2000).

start of a colony by an outlaw whose identity in many ways embodies the modern conceptualization of what a Viking was. Yet through his actions and the actions of those that followed him the Norse who settled in Greenland were able to maintain peace amongst themselves for five hundred years.⁹ But by the fifteenth century Eirik the Red's Viking Greenland had fallen apart.

Historians and archaeologists alike have in past years attributed the exit of the Norse Vikings from Greenland solely to climate change, but in what ways would climate change have truly affected their livelihood? ¹⁰ Viking settlements in Greenland and North America were inhabited during the five centuries leading up to Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492. This timing raises many questions in addition to the effects of climate change such as when did the rest of Europe start to become aware of lands to the west? The Norse were able to carve from a harsh environment settlements complete with a network of churches spread across a vast expanse of Greenland with the additional challenge of coexisting with the Thule, the ancestors of the modern day Inuit. Contact with the natives who had existed in the North Atlantic since ancient times was unavoidable and would have led to trade relations and possibly eventual conflict. These pieces of information warrant further investigation which will lead to a broader understanding of why the Vikings abandoned their settlements. The purpose of this paper is to analyze both textual and archaeological evidence for the Viking presence in Greenland and North America during the first half of the second millennium in order to better understand how they both found success and lost sustainability there. It further hints at how their exploration contributed to the rush to discover new lands by other Europeans in the fifteenth century.

⁹ Geoffrey Jules Marcus, *The Conquest of the North Atlantic* (Boydell & Brewer, 2007): 66.

¹⁰ Mooney.

Initial Contact and Development in North America

The date of *The Vinland Sagas* is unconfirmed, but they are believed to be connected to an early twelfth century source known as “Islendingabok” or *The Book of the Icelanders* which was written by Ari Thorgilsson the Learned prior to the year 1133.¹¹ *The Vinland Sagas* is comprised of two separate Icelandic medieval accounts, *Eirik the Red’s Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders* which details the adventures of Eirik the Red’s children, particularly Leif the Lucky who first explores Vinland.¹² *The Saga of the Greenlanders* tells of Leif’s voyage around the year 1000 in search of land west of Greenland. Leif’s expedition succeeded in identifying three separate bodies of land. The first had very rocky terrain and was named by Leif as “Helluland” meaning “stone-slab land.” The second he called “Markland” meaning “forest land” because of its dense tree population. On the third and final land the crew found grapes, rivers teeming with salmon, and an abundance of grass considered valuable for grazing livestock. Leif called it “Vinland” meaning “wineland” because of the many vines of grapes that were found.

In Vinland, Leif and his crew are said to have “built large houses.”¹³ The houses are also mentioned several times at later points in the text where Leif gives permission to Thorfinn Karlsefni and Freydis Eiriksdottir to use the houses on their own separate voyages to Vinland.¹⁴ Evidence of such a settlement was discovered in the 1960’s in Newfoundland. Helge Ingstad and his wife, Dr. Anne Stine Ingstad, an archaeologist, discovered a Viking home site in L’anse Aux Meadows. The couple had spent many years prior tracking Viking migration across the

¹¹ Kirsten Seaver, *The Frozen Echo; Greenland and the Exploration of North America ca A.D. 1000-1500* (Stanford:Stanford University, 1996), 14-15.

¹² Persson, 620.

¹³ *The Vinland Sagas*, 4-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 15-18.

Atlantic where along the way they did a great deal of excavation in Greenland.¹⁵ There, they found an abundance of wooden materials in Viking settlements. Helge Ingstad noted, however, that there is still a great lack of forests in Greenland which could be indicative of the Vikings having harvested the lumber elsewhere: such as Markland.¹⁶ At the site in Newfoundland the Ingstads found eight large, turf houses some of which were nearly eighty feet long.¹⁷ The structures were dated to around the early eleventh century which coincides with when Leif Eirikson began his settlement in Vinland.¹⁸ In one of the smaller structures alongside a stream, Ingstad found remnants of a smithy including “an anvil, a large earth-fast stone, and iron fragments” as well as “bog iron” which was often used by Vikings.¹⁹

Despite these finds there is no physical evidence of grapes having grown around the settlement. They found an abundant variety of berries native to Norway growing on the site, but not grapes.²⁰ In L’anse Aux Meadows, Ingstad also found the remains of three butternuts which are commonly found south of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the same region where wild grapes are currently known to grow.²¹ However, Jacques Cartier while exploring the same region during the 1530’s reported that grapes grew on both sides of the gulf.²² If this is true then it is possible that five centuries prior grapes grew as far north as L’anse Aux Meadows and that climate change negatively affected their growth. It is therefore likely that Newfoundland is the lush Vinland where Leif the Lucky built his settlement and grazed livestock.

¹⁵ Helge Ingstad, *The Viking Discovery of America: The Excavation of a Norse Settlement in L’anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2001), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷ Ingstad, 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

²¹ *The Vinland Sagas*, xxvii.

²² Seaver, 24.

Along with the discovery of a new land came the introduction to an unknown group of people. The Thule lived along the farthest reaches of the northern coasts of both Canada and Greenland, but others such as the ancient Innu of eastern Labrador and the Beothuk of Newfoundland also lived there throughout the period in which the Norse traversed the North Atlantic.²³ In *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, Thorfinn Karlsefni and his crew experience several encounters in Vinland, Markland, and Helluland including instances of trade and warfare with the natives whom they referred to collectively as the “Skraelings.”²⁴ The saga tells of one instance of trade between Vikings and Native Americans. Every other encounter with the Skraelings ends in conflict. Violence would have undoubtedly been of more interest to Viking story tellers which could explain why more detail is not shared about trade.

The first encounter in the sagas is during a voyage led by Thorvald Eiriksson, one of Leif the Lucky’s younger brothers. When leaving Markland, he and his crew are faced with nine natives, eight of whom are captured and killed, while one escapes.²⁵ After the Norsemen reach their ship a multitude of natives in skin-covered canoes attack resulting in Thorvald’s death.²⁶ During a later expedition to Vinland, Thorfinn Karlsefni trades with the natives, but refuses to trade weapons which results in an attempt by Skraelings to steal from the Vikings.²⁷ A battle ensues and many of the natives are killed.²⁸ The conclusion of the battle is extremely poignant but leaves much to be desired from a historian’s stand point: “One of the natives then picked up an axe, peered at it a while and then aimed at one of his companions and struck him. The other fellow was killed outright. The tall man [the leader] then picked up the axe, examined it awhile

²³ See Fig. 1. *Arctic Cultures 900-1500*: Hans Christian Gullov, *Gronlands Forhistorie* (Kobenhavn: Gyldendal, 2004).

²⁴ *The Vinland Sagas*, 15-16.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 10-11.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 15-16.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

and then threw it as far out into the sea as he could. After that the natives fled into the woods at top speed, and they had no more dealings with them.²⁹ In this passage, the meaning of the word “dealings” is unclear. It could mean that they ceased either fighting or trade. Even by the sixteenth century when later Europeans arrived, the Beothuk of Newfoundland were described as “extremely hostile and intractable” and were subsequently annihilated.³⁰ Continual warfare is a plausible reason why the Vikings abandoned their settlement in Newfoundland. However, Greenland’s uninterrupted supply of timber after this time indicates that the Norse continued voyages if not to trade, to harvest.³¹ Labrador is highly forested supporting the notion that it is Markland. Taking into account L’anse Aux Meadows’ close proximity to Labrador, the Skraelings defeated in the sagas seem to be from Markland since they are encountered near wooded areas most often.³² The Vikings likely continued to encounter the Skraelings of Markland, or the Innu, during raids for lumber long after use of the Vinland settlement had ceased due to warfare with the Beothuk.³³

Growth in Greenland

While a concentrated group of able bodies sailed west to harvest resources in Canada, the majority of the Norse population remained in Greenland. Here, a network of farms began to grow fueled by incoming settlers. There were two main settlements in Greenland. The first and largest was “Osterbygden” or the Eastern Settlement on the southern tip of Greenland around

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Robert McGhee, “Contact between Native North Americans and the Medieval Norse: A Review of the Evidence,” *American Antiquity* 49 (1984): 8.

³¹ Ingstad, 17.

³² Seaver, 28.

³³ Gullov.

what is now the Julianehaab district.³⁴ The second was “Vesterbygden” or the Western Settlement located farther north on the west coast near Nuuk, Greenland’s modern capital.

The “Medieval Warm Period” began around the year 950, merely three decades before Eirik the Red’s voyage to Greenland. This particular instance of climate change made a favorable impact on the livelihood of Norse farmers settling in Greenland just as it had for farmers in Europe.³⁶ It has been estimated that during the early eleventh century the Viking diet in Greenland was made up mostly of agricultural products such as cattle, sheep, pigs, and crops while the remaining twenty to thirty percent consisted of ocean life.³⁷ By 1025 the inlet that led sailors to Brattahlid, Eiriksfiord, had become a common place of business and Greenlanders embarked from this point to Iceland as well as Norway to trade.³⁸ This successful trade system outside of the colony indicates how Greenland was being developed by a more reliable economic method than “marauding.”³⁹ The extent to which the Church was involved in Greenland provides another clue as to how highly developed the settlements in Greenland were.

At the time of Eirik the Red’s crossing to Greenland, the Scandinavian countries were starting to favor Christianity over the old Norse gods.⁴⁰ This shift developed from the Church’s increasing involvement in those locations. In the five years leading up to the discovery of Vinland, Olaf Tryggvason was king of Norway.⁴¹ According to *Eirik the Red’s Saga*, Leif served as one of King Olaf’s men.⁴² In doing so he was instructed by the king to return to Greenland in

³⁴ Persson, 620.

³⁶ Mooney.

³⁷ Gunther Stockinger, translated by Christopher Sultan, “Abandoned Colony in Greenland: Archaeologists Find Clues to Viking Mystery,” *Spiegel Online* (2013). <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/archaeologists-uncover-clues-to-why-vikings-abandoned-greenland-a-876626.html>

³⁸ Marcus, 66-67.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

⁴⁰ *The Vinland Sagas*, 31-33.

⁴¹ Seaver, 15.

⁴² *The Vinland Sagas*, 33.

order to facilitate the spread of Christianity there.⁴³ Arriving home at Brattahlid, Leif did as he was instructed. His mother, Thjodhild, converted to Christianity with ease.⁴⁴ Eirik was less eager to relinquish the old customs, but allowed a small church to be built near the house for his wife.⁴⁵ In 1961, a horseshoe-shaped “church 6.5 feet wide and 11.5 feet long” was found near the site of Brattahlid.⁴⁶ In the years following this discovery, 144 skeletons were excavated next to the structure further proving it a church.⁴⁷ As the population in Greenland grew so did the number of small churches along with an expressed need for formal governance of them.

Knowledge of the discovery of Greenland and land beyond it began to gradually seep into Europe in the eleventh century as indicated by papal records. The first documented reference to Greenland can be found in a letter written by Pope Leo IX in 1053.⁴⁸ Iclander Eirik Gnuppson, also known as Eirik Upsi, is recorded as Greenland’s first bishop. In 1112, he was seated at Sandnes church where he remained until 1121 when he left in search of Vinland and was never heard from again.⁴⁹ The second bishop sent to Greenland, Arnald, arrived in 1124.⁵⁰ He was given a small farm at Gardar near Brattahlid where the Greenlanders built a cathedral that could hold hundreds of people and dedicated it to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of seafarers.⁵¹ The cathedral was accompanied by a tithe barn which could fit one hundred cows.⁵² These developments indicate that Greenland’s population was growing. A papal letter of 1133 contains the “confirmation of the Hamburg archbishop’s authority by Innocent II – an authority that now

⁴³ Ibid, 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 35.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Brown.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Seaver, 45.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 32-33.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 33.

⁵¹ Brown.

⁵² Ibid.

included not only Greenland but the Faroes.”⁵³ Additional proof of papal knowledge of new lands is found in a separate letter written after 1159 by Pope Alexander III in which he speaks of a territorial island of Norway.⁵⁴ A few decades later, Adam of Bremen records how Vinland got its namesake.⁵⁵ A small detail that further hints at the interconnectedness of church officials in the North Atlantic is the two windows that Bishop Pall brought to his cathedral in Iceland after being ordained in 1195.⁵⁶ The windows’ blue green hue matches the windows in the bell tower of Gardar suggesting both sets of glass came from the same source.⁵⁷

Until the late twelfth century, the Thule of northern Greenland had not encountered the Vikings. Ari Thorgilsson’s “*Islendingabok*,” mentioned at the beginning of this paper, “says that Eirik and his people found only ruins and remnants of stone tools and boats from the Skraelings” where the Norse settled in southern Greenland.⁵⁸ The predecessors of the Thule had entered Greenland around the year 500.⁵⁹ They existed in southern Greenland until around the beginning of the tenth century when they migrated north due to a shift in survival practices which led to the advancement of their sea travel.⁶⁰ This allowed them to hunt more efficiently off the northern coasts whose waters contained massive amounts of marine creatures including walrus and seal.⁶¹ But by the onset of the thirteenth century the Thule had begun to migrate back down the western coast of Greenland where they were met by the Norse whose own hunting trips took them

⁵³ Seaver, 45.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 33-34.

⁵⁵ Niccolo Zeno (1515-1565), trans. by Richard Henry Major, *The Voyages of Nicolo and Antonio Zeno to the Northern Seas, in the XIVth Century: Comprising the Latest Known Accounts of the Lost Colony of Greenland and of the Northmen in America Before Columbus* (New York: Hakluyt Society, 1873): xcii.

⁵⁶ Seaver, 65.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁹ Persson, 620.

⁶⁰ Seaver, 21.

⁶¹ Ibid.

north.⁶² The Norse had begun to sail north in the summers “hunting for polar bears and large marine animals, especially the walrus with its ivory tusks,” a valuable item to trade with mainland Europeans.⁶³

The Ingstads found many Dorset, Thule, and Viking artifacts in close proximity to Viking and Thule settlements indicating continued contact between the natives and the Norse.⁶⁴ These objects, “such as chess pieces, iron rivets, woven cloth, and bits of chain mail” were “found on both the Canadian and Greenlandic side of Smith Sound” and could be indicative of an established trade relation.⁶⁵ A more curious find was a coin found in Penobscot Bay, Maine in 1957.⁶⁶ This “Maine Penny” was discovered on the grounds of a former Native American trade village known as the Goddard site.⁶⁷ The silver coin is believed to have been minted in the eleventh century during the reign of Olaf Kyrre, king of Norway.⁶⁸ The coin also appears to have been fashioned as a pendant, and further analysis has shown that the artifact contains particles of Ramah chert and “a fragment of a Dorset burin-like tool.”⁶⁹ However, Ramah chert is primarily found in Northern Labrador, not Maine.⁷⁰ The coin was probably obtained from Vikings by the Innu in Labrador, a place still visited as late as 1347, and then traded to or otherwise obtained by other groups of natives in regions beyond the Viking’s sphere of travel.⁷¹

⁶² Jens Peder Hart Hansen, *Greenland Mummies* (Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991): 15.

⁶³ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁴ Seaver, 42.

⁶⁵ Seaver, 42.

⁶⁶ “Maine Penny,” Maine State Museum, accessed February 17, 2016.

https://www.mnh.si.edu/vikings/voyage/subset/vinland/pop_archeo2.html.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Seaver, 36.

⁶⁹ William W. Fitzhugh, *Cultures in Contact: The European Impact on Native Cultural Institutions in Eastern North America, A.D. 1000-1800* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985): 28.

⁷⁰ McGhee, 13.

⁷¹ Zeno, xciii : More evidence of contact with Markland in 1347 as well as information about harvested lumber is in the “Skalholt Annals”(Seaver, 28).

Beginning of the End

In the fourteenth century, a number of factors began to negatively impact the Norse's livelihood in Greenland. The medieval warm period ended around 1250 and by 1300 the "Little Ice Age" had begun.⁷² Around this time there were approximately one hundred and ninety farms in Osterbygden and ninety in Vesterbygden.⁷³ Despite a lack in evidence of disease, pigs and cattle in Greenland had disappeared. The Norse relied on these animals for sustenance when their crops failed and thereby extinguished the supply of readily available meat.⁷⁴ In response to this they turned to hunting meaning that eighty percent of the Viking diet consisted of ocean life, predominately seal meat.⁷⁵ Archaeological evidence found in 1976 and 1977 reveals that up until the mid-fourteenth century flies were living in some farm houses, likely feeding on the remnants of slaughtered animals and latrine materials.⁷⁶ More evidence from the same sites reveal how dire circumstances actually were: "During a freezing winter, the farmers killed and ate their livestock, including a newborn calf and lamb, leaving the bones and hoofs on the ground. Even the deerhound, probably the companion of many a hunt, may have been slaughtered for food; one of its leg bones bore the knicks of a knifeblade."⁷⁷

Climate change was not the only factor threatening Greenland's livelihood. The colony's economic survival was in jeopardy due to a decline in trade with mainland Europe after the 1340s when the Black Death struck.⁷⁸ In the decades following this event, demand for the

⁷² Mooney.

⁷³ Hansen, 15.

⁷⁴ Stockinger.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Brown.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Stockinger.

colony's exports decreased and "regular ship traffic with Norway and Iceland had ceased."⁷⁹ The Church also owned an estimated two thirds of Greenland's pasture land though less clergymen were willing to travel there.⁸⁰ Bishop Alf, the last bishop in Greenland, died in 1378.⁸¹ The following year a passage was recorded in the Icelandic *Annals* which described an attack on Greenland "from the heathens neighbouring coasts."⁸² This attack was blamed on the Skraelings, but it is actually possible "the attackers may in fact have been pirates from Europe."⁸³ Almost two decades prior a Minorite friar arrived in Greenland from England.⁸⁴ The story of his trip was presented normally as if nothing unfamiliar had taken place suggesting outside Europeans had some familiarity with Greenland further begging the question of who else might have ventured that way: "Herjolfsnes had been the first port of call for ships from Iceland and northern Europe. Archaeologists wondered who might have come to Greenland after Norse traders ceased to arrive. The most likely answer was English sea rovers or Basque whalers. According to their own tradition, Basques founded a whaling station in Newfoundland as early as 1372. They had only to follow Leif Eriksson's route north to reach Greenland."⁸⁶

A text was published in 1558 about members of the Italian Zeno family, mainly Nicolo and Antonio Zeno, who lived during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The publication provides a broader look at European travel and activity in the North Atlantic.⁸⁷ In 1390, Messire Nicolo Zeno, the Chevalier, was thrown off course during a sea expedition and ended up in the Faeroe Islands where Zeno's crew was rescued by Henry Sinclair, Earl of the Orkney and

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Brown.

⁸¹ Seaver, 140.

⁸² Hansen, 19.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Seaver, 123.

⁸⁶ Brown.

⁸⁷ Zeno, vi.

Caithness.⁸⁸ Sinclair is referred to as “Zichmni” in the text and described as “a warlike, valiant man, and specially famous in naval exploits” because he had “gained a victory over the King of Norway.”⁸⁹ Both Nicolo and Antonio fought alongside Sinclair in his failed attempt to plunder Shetland Island.⁹⁰ After this, Nicolo retreats to the island Bres off the east coast of Iceland from which he ventures to Greenland.⁹¹ There, he briefly encounters a monastery seemingly immune to the cold because of a hot spring connected to it.⁹² Shortly after returning to Frislanda, Nicolo dies of an illness possibly associated with an epidemic that struck Iceland in 1402 and lasted two years resulting in the death of two thirds of the island’s population.⁹³ Nicolo’s fantasized report of the settlement in Greenland, likely embellished by his descendent who adhered to the Italian storytelling style of the sixteenth century, greatly differs from what archaeological evidence clearly points to as a failing civilization.⁹⁴

Ultimately, the Zeno text serves as evidence of Southern European knowledge of Norse expansion but also supports the idea that the North Atlantic territories including Greenland were being pillaged by rogue Europeans. Due to “English and German pirates” having attacked Iceland during the fifteenth century, “King Erik VII of Denmark, Norway and Sweden was forced repeatedly to request the English King Henry V prohibit the illegal English traffic.”⁹⁵ This could be related to the voyages conducted by Henry Sinclair and others like him and the conflict caused by them is another factor which contributed to the downfall of the Greenland settlements.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 3-6.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 10.

⁹¹ Ibid, 12-13.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Brown: There were no mass graves found in Greenland to support that the disease had spread.

⁹⁴ Zeno, 12-13.

⁹⁵ Hansen, 19.

The Exit

The Western Settlement is believed to have been abandoned around the mid-fourteenth century.⁹⁶ One of the last recorded pieces of information by the Greenlanders themselves before their disappearance is in the form of a marriage document.⁹⁷ A young, married couple who relocated to Iceland from Greenland in the early fifteenth century were required to provide written evidence of their marriage to the bishop.⁹⁸ Thorstein Olafsson, married Sigríð Björnsdóttir in the church on the Hvalsey Fjord on September 14, 1408.⁹⁹ Aside from this evidence, most of the information about the Greenlanders' final days is found in archaeological data taken from the sites of the former settlements. European contact with settlements in Greenland is shown to have lasted up until 1492 when a bishop appointed to Gardar was exempted from having to fulfill this duty since "this bishopric had for a long time had no income" from tithes.¹⁰⁰ This information suggests that the Norse had left Greenland well before this time. Prior to this in 1448, Pope Nicholas V instructed Icelandic bishops to send a bishop along with priests to Greenland, but there is no evidence of them actually having travelled there.¹⁰¹

Due to the declining involvement of Church officials and the absence of both tithe and tax revenue generated in Greenland, King Christian I of Denmark sent an envoy to assess the situation sometime between 1472 and 1475.¹⁰² The men sent reported that some Norsemen still

⁹⁶ Persson, 620.

⁹⁷ Persson, 620.

⁹⁸ Stockinger.

⁹⁹ Persson, 620.

¹⁰⁰ Hansen, 19.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 18-19.

¹⁰² Ibid, 15-19.

remained in the Eastern colony.¹⁰³ While sailing along the east coast, Christian I's men were ambushed by natives travelling on "small ships lacking keels, in great number."¹⁰⁴ The Thule had possibly spread to and positioned themselves in Southern Greenland.¹⁰⁵ The spread of the Thule this far south coincides with the mid-fourteenth century report by Ivar Bardson that the "Skraelings" had taken over the Western Settlement.¹⁰⁶ This means the Thule were likely pushing the Norse out of the settlements in response to the climate changes mentioned previously.¹⁰⁷ The Thule pressed south in order to gain more hunting areas likely competing with the less skilled Norse hunters.¹⁰⁸ The Norse settlers began to leave Greenland in the mid-fifteenth century.¹⁰⁹ Skeletons of the elderly found in the graveyard at Herjolfsnes suggests that the young left first in a swift mass movement.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The negative economic and climactic factors in Greenland were made worse by conflict with both European pirates and the migrating Thule. However, in the last century of the Norse colonization of Greenland the Vikings' refusal to adapt to their changing conditions was the most significant reason for their failure.¹¹¹ The decomposed bodies at Herjolfsnes wore traditionally European style clothing rather than dress acquired from the Thule, indicative of a Viking refusal

¹⁰³ Hansen, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Hansen, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Hansen, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Stockinger.

¹¹⁰ Hansen, 18-19.

¹¹¹ Brown.

to abandon their European identity.¹¹² By refusing to adapt further, the Norse in Greenland doomed their settlements. Yet from this failed adventure came knowledge of lands west of Europe. Extensive papal documentation of Iceland and Greenland led to the spread of knowledge of the North Atlantic amongst Southern Europeans like the Zeno Brothers and the Portuguese, Joao Vaz Corte-Reale.¹¹³ This information was undoubtedly passed along to Columbus.¹¹⁴ The seemingly isolated Viking presence in the North Atlantic when approached with global history in mind produces a larger picture of how their exploration impacted the rest of Europe and eventually led to the discovery of North and South America.

About the author

Caitlyn Floyd Geiger graduated with a B.A. in History from Armstrong State University in December of 2016. Her main research interests are military history and archaeological studies. She hopes to use the knowledge and skills she has gained in college to further her career as a fiction writer.

Recommended citation

Geiger, Caitlyn Floyd. "The Vikings in the North Atlantic: The Rise and Fall of the Greenland Colony." *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History* 7, no. 1 (April 2016).

¹¹² Brown: See also points made by Thomas H. McGovern, "Cows, Harp Seals, and Churchbells: Adaptation and Extinction in Norse Greenland," *Human Ecology* 8 (1980), 245-275.

¹¹³ Hansen, 19.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

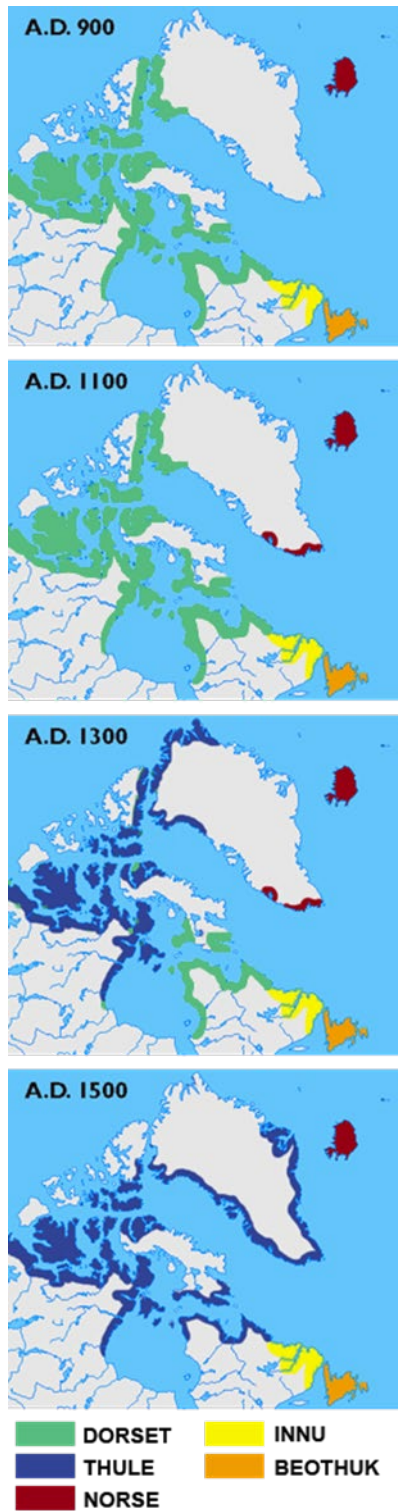


Figure 1. *Arctic Cultures 900-1500*: Hans Christian Gullov, *Gronlands Forhistorie* (Kobenhavn: Gyldendal, 2004): <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1415586>